

Belt and Road Initiative: Opportunities and Challenges for Mongolia

By [Yelif Ulagpan](#)

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Introduction

The past decade has seen the emergence of new concepts such as China's "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the United States' "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" in the international relations arena of the Asia-Pacific. While experts, analysts, and scholars have questioned and tried to define the significance and concepts of these clashing initiatives, there is no consensus on what exactly these concepts mean in theory and practice. Official documents and announcements explain its rationale as being based on shared values such as 'peace' and 'prosperity'. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which was launched by Chinese President Xi Jinping in 2013, proclaims 'peaceful development' and 'economic cooperation' through regional connectivity across Asia, Europe, and Africa. (Office of the Leading Group for the Belt and Road Initiative, 2017) The Initiative is based on the five conceptual pillars of policy coordination, facilitating connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and people-to-people exchanges. These pillars are linked to the Sustainable Development Goals that were adopted by the United Nations. (United Nations, 2019) Since its initiation, the BRI has been the object of analysis and debate. Interpretations range from seeing the BRI as a Chinese version of the "Marshall Plan" designed to expand economic development as well as China's sphere of influence and as a way to transfer Chinese excess production capacity abroad (Simon Shen, 2016), to describing it as "the new phase of globalization integrating the inland and marine economies." (Zheng Bijian, 2017)

Regardless of differing views, developing economic corridors is a priority for the BRI in promoting the regional cooperation and economic development agenda. Therefore, it is important to conceptualize the term 'economic corridor' first to better understand the BRI. Although 'economic corridors' have become an integral part of development projects across various countries and regions, there is no clear definition. However, the concept of 'corridor' comes from issues related to trade and accessibility problems affecting countries that lack access to the sea. (Siegfried O.Wolf, 2020) Economic corridors play a crucial role in integrating local economies into international value and supply chains in global and regional economic development strategies. (ADB, 2014) Experts view "economic corridors" not just as transport connections that facilitate the movement of people and goods, but an integrated network of infrastructure that can spur economic development in the defined geographical area. (Hans-Peter Brunner, 2013)

Indeed, the Corridor envisaged under the BRI is a broad concept that goes beyond road

building. The BRI encompasses the following six economic corridors: “the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor”, “The New Eurasia Land Bridge Economic Corridor”, “China-Central Asia-West Asia Economic Corridor”, “China-Indochina Peninsula Economic Corridor”, “China-Pakistan Economic Corridor”, and “Bangladesh-China-India-Myanmar Economic Corridor” (*Belt and Road Portal, 2019*). In fact, if fully realized, the BRI is projected to create economic corridors that benefit 4.4 billion people, more than half (63%) of the global population with a collective annual Gross Domestic Product of 2.1 trillion United States dollars, which account for 29% of the world’s wealth (*Christopher K. Johnson, 2016*). However, questions arise about the implementation of these projects in the local contexts, including the opportunities and challenges, and the beneficiaries.

Within the framework of the BRI, Mongolia has become a key transport corridor between China-Russia and Europe. It is in one of the six main economic corridors – “the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor (hereinafter, CMREC).” Given this, Mongolia is profoundly affected by this grand strategy, though the details of this potential impact are as yet unclear. This article analyzes the BRI in the Mongolian context. It first explores the origins of the idea of a ‘China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor’ and how it is envisaged within the context of Mongolia’s ‘Steppe Road’ project. This will then be analyzed to identify potential challenges and opportunities.

BRI: China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor

The proposal of the tripartite ‘economic corridor’ emerged during the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) Summit of heads of state of China, Mongolia and Russia in Dushanbe, Tajikistan in 2014. During the summit, Mongolian president’s proposal to use its territory as a passage of international traffic between China and Russia coincided with Chinese president Xi Jinping’s proposal of constructing an economic corridor among the three nations. (*Uradyn E. Bulag, 2014*) This was further discussed in 2015 during the meeting of China’s Foreign Minister Wang Yi and the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Mongolia Lundeg Purevsuren (*People’s Daily, 2015*). During the meeting, Lundeg Purevsuren expressed Mongolia’s interest in joining the initiative and developing the economy by integrating it with Mongolia’s ‘Steppe Road’ or ‘Prairie Road’ initiative. (*The Jamestown Foundation, 2015*) Meanwhile, Russia’s interest was in news sources covering the meeting. *Russia Today* quoted Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi’s speech “There is a huge area for cooperation existing between China, Russia, and Mongolia. The China Mongolia-Russia economic corridor would connect China’s Silk Road Economic Belt to Russia’s transcontinental rail plan and Mongolia’s Prairie Road program” (*RT, 2015*) Russian media noted that this concept coincided with Russia’s Eurasian transport corridor initiative, which involves high-speed rail and road links between Moscow and Beijing. Following this, the three countries signed a Memorandum-of-Understanding (MoU) to build an “Economic Corridor” on the basis of their respective development strategies during the trilateral meeting in Ufa, Russia in 2015.

In 2016, China, Mongolia, and Russia signed a trilateral agreement to build an economic corridor on the sidelines of the 16th summit of the Council of Heads of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Member States held in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. As ‘*The Diplomat*’ remarked at the time, instead of focusing on the Shanghai Cooperation Organization agenda, the members and guests used this opportunity to settle trilateral issues. The origin of this Mongolia-Russia-China ‘trilateralism’ can be traced back to the post-Ukrainian crisis and the rapprochement between China and Russia in 2014. While Russia has had to shift its economy towards China due to the sanctions imposed from the West after the annexation of Crimea, Mongolia sought a ‘trilateralism’ strategy to prevent being bypassed by a new

version of the Eurasian Silk Road. It is in Mongolia's interest not only to promote Mongolia as 'a reliable and cheaper 'Economic Corridor' for Sino-Russian transit traffic across Eurasia' but also to increase Russia's investment in Mongolia, building a transport infrastructure that would connect with the Trans-Siberian rail system and further with China and the Asia-Pacific. (*Alicia Campi, 2020*)

Prospects of Mongolia's 'Steppe Road' project under the CMREC

Within the scope of the BRI, among the proposed 190 projects from the Chinese side, Mongolia selected 32 projects for advancing its development priorities. The projects are in various fields such as transportation and infrastructure (railway, logistics, road, and telecommunication), industrial sector, development of border-crossing points, energy sector, facilitation of trade and inspection procedures, environment and energy, education, science, and technology cooperation, humanitarian, agriculture and medical science. Among these projects, more than one third (13) involve transportation infrastructure as regional connectivity is the main target of the initiative. (*UB Post, 2019*) On that basis, in 2014, the Government of Mongolia came up with a plan called a "Steppe Road" (in Mongolian, 'Талын Зам') project to use their geographical location to connect Asia and Europe. The goal is to create a favorable political and economic environment with their two neighbors and for the landlocked nation to export its products to third markets through their territories. The project involves building roads, railways, oil and gas pipelines, and power lines, and connecting the southern and northern neighbors with infrastructure. In other words, the idea is to build trade and economic cooperation between the two neighbors using Mongolia as a 'bridge' over land and an important transit corridor between Asia and Europe. In the same year, Russia signed a 30-year gas deal with China (effective from 2018) worth 400 billion US dollars amid its worsened relations with the western countries. Although the two countries initially planned to build a 4000 kilometer gas pipeline, the Russian side also expressed interest in exporting its natural gas through Mongolia. This was welcomed by Mongolian authorities as it would allow it to export its natural gas through this channel. Later, the Ministry of Economic Development (dissolved in 2014) which calculated that through Mongolia it would only require a 1500 kilometer gas pipeline. In September 2014, the then Mongolian Prime Minister Norov Altankhuyag conveyed Mongolia's interest in serving as a 'bridge' between China and Russia during his meeting with President Vladimir Putin in Saint-Petersburg. Shortly afterward, the Government of Mongolia established a working group on the 'Steppe Road' project (*B.Shadavdolgor, 2016*).

The Mongolian-proposed 'Steppe Road' project involves railway, railroad, power line, oil and gas pipeline projects. Under the railway project, the aim is to upgrade the Trans-Mongolian railway corridor in conjunction with the railway capacity of its two neighbors. With regard to the railroad plan, the goal is to build three vertical and three horizontal tunnels. Mongolian planners estimate that reaching Eastern Europe through Mongolia takes ten fewer days while it takes more than a month to reach Europe from China by sea. (*S. Batbaatar, 2015*) Also, as the Asian Highway (AH) passes through Mongolia, it would create favorable conditions for the implementation of related road projects. In turn, this would not only contribute to infrastructure development such as trade and logistics centers in Mongolia but also serve as a 'bridge' connecting two continents. Another important Steppe Road project is a power line. With the increasing energy consumption of the three countries, energy cooperation and building an energy system is a priority. China is by far the largest consumer of energy not just in the region but globally. Although most of China's energy is coal based, it has recently been exploring solar and wind renewable alternatives. Russia and Mongolia

are major energy suppliers to their southern neighbor. This is also true for the oil pipeline project. Both Mongolia and Russia have oil reserves and Russia supplies oil to China via Manchuria. Building a pipeline in Mongolia would allow both countries to export oil and natural gas to China.

In 2017, the Chinese and Mongolian governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding on BRI cooperation during the first Belt and Road Forum held in Beijing. This was followed by a cooperation plan for promoting the BRI with Mongolia's 'Steppe Road' program in April 2019 during a state visit of Mongolian President Khaltmaa Battulga to Beijing (*China Global Television Network, 2019*). In the same year, the President of Mongolia urged its two partners to accelerate construction of a network of cross-border highways, facilitate customs clearance, strengthen energy cooperation, and discuss the construction of regional power grids during the fifth trilateral meeting of presidents of Russia, Mongolia, and China. According to (*Gal Luft, 2017*) trade between China and Mongolia currently follows two routes: (1) 1,200-mile from Ulaanbaatar to the Port of Tianjin (passing through Erenhot in Inner Mongolia) and (2) a 1,400-mile route from Choibalsan (eastern Mongolia) to the Port of Dalian through Manzhouli in Inner Mongolia. The plan under the CMREC is to build high-speed rail and road, the first to connect the Bohai Bay Economic Circle (the economic region surrounding Beijing-Tianjin-Hebei region) to Russia via Hohhot (Inner Mongolia) and the second from Dalian to Chita in Russia via Shenyang, Changchun, Harbin and Manzhouli. According to some sources, this would allow the cargo to reach Western Europe three times faster than by sea) (*Ж.Гөлгөө, Б.Индра 2017*) with the Mongolian cargo routed through Qinhuangdao, the world's largest coal export port in China. (*Gal Luft, 2017*) Other proposed rail projects under the CMREC such as connecting Tavan Tolgoi (one of the world's largest untapped coking and thermal coal deposits, located in the Omnogovi Province in southern Mongolia) to the Chinese border have slowed for now due to lack of funding and other external factors.



Source: [Geopolitical Monitor](#)

Opportunities and Challenges

Judging from the projects launched in Mongolia under the BRI, the majority of proposed projects are related to transportation infrastructure and the railway projects are related to mining. This is also the case in Russia (the Far East and East Siberian regions). In the Mongolian case, while mining and enrichment will take place on Mongolian territory, the products will be transported to China. Coming to transit points, the capital, Ulaanbaatar, is identified as the main transit point in Mongolia, but the Altai (Gobi-Altai) city in Western Mongolia is also listed as a conditional junction point of the Chuya Highway (also known as Russian route R256 in Novosibirsk Oblast, Altai Krai and Altai Republic of Russia) with a potential road from Kyzyl in Russia. On Russian territory, Yekaterinburg is identified as the endpoint connecting all routes from China to the West along with Novosibirsk, Barnaul, Abakan, Taishet, Ulan-Ude, Kyzyl, and Chita. (*See map*) These Russian cities are listed as potential future hubs of transshipment logistics centers and cargo-forming areas from and to China.

From a Mongolian perspective, the construction of railways and roads would improve its infrastructure and open new opportunities to export its products to Europe through Russia. Mongolia's main exports are copper, coal, gold as well as cashmere and animal products

such as meat and wool. Its main imports are refined petroleum, mineral fuels, petroleum oils along with machinery and equipment, cars, and consumer goods. Russia is the main supplier of Mongolia's power and energy and about 80 percent of Mongolia's oil. However, almost half of its total external trade is with China, which receives more than 90 percent of Mongolia's exports (mainly, natural resources such as iron ore, copper and gold). Also, revenue from transit fees could contribute to economic growth. In short, the establishment of the Corridor will further strengthen and intensify economic cooperation among the three countries.

From a Russian perspective, this would not only contribute to its domestic socio-economic development using the natural resources of the Far East region but integrate trade with Mongolia, China, South Korea and Japan. Additionally, the natural resources of the Far East and Siberia would attract foreign investment (*B.Otgonsuren, 2015*). However, some research suggests that the prospects for transit through Mongolia are relatively low and restricted mainly to the transportation of timber from Russia. This is because Russian experts calculate that the majority of freight traffic including coal, grain and containers either passes through the Trans-Siberian Railway to Chita and further to Harbin, or goes through Kazakhstan to Urumqi and farther to southern China (Beijing). They also note that for the successful operation of the already established routes through Mongolia, such measures as reduction of tariffs, advertising campaigns, ensuring lower risk indicators of the safety of cargo and smooth cross-border operations would facilitate trade between the countries. (*V.Yu. Malov, 2018*)



Source: V.Yu. Malov, "Assessment of the Prospects for Mongolian Transit as an Integral Part of the Belt and Road Initiative," Regional Research of Russia, 2019.

There are further benefits and challenges regarding implementation of the BRI projects. Apart from financial issues and railway gauge differences of the three countries and other related technical difficulties, there are socio-economic, political, and environmental risks associated with the BRI projects. While Mongolia is keen to develop its infrastructure and rail transportation, it lacks financial and technical resources. This means that the financing of the projects will largely depend on Chinese enterprises and the Chinese state. In turn, this could place Mongolia at risk of excessive borrowing, thus increasing its dependency on China. In fact, some research suggests that Mongolia is among the high-risk countries under debt distress through the BRI. (*John Hurley et al, 2018*)

There are, however, opportunities. Mongolia's economy is heavily dependent on its mining sector and the recent Chinese ban on Australian coal opens the way for Mongolia to become China's top coking coal supplier. It is worth noting that Northern and northeastern parts of China (Manchuria and Inner Mongolia) are the key regions for the coking coal market. BRI projects such as railways and gas pipelines would smooth these processes and create economic opportunities. This would allow China to meet its demand for coal and other natural gas from its two close neighbors at low cost. Mongolia and Russia could become the main coal suppliers not just for China, but potentially to other Northeast Asian markets such as Japan.

On the other hand, the BRI transportation projects pose environmental risks, as noted by *the World Bank*. Direct effects of the construction and operations of roads and rails include air and water pollution, soil erosion, habitat destruction and fragmentation, and timber

depletion. Indirect effects are generated through road or railway operations. The changes in transport availability and costs shift markets and human populations with far-reaching economic and environmental effects, such as habitat loss for numerous species, deforestation, wildlife and timber trafficking. A spatial assessment carried out by The World Wildlife Fund in 2017 found significant overlap between the BRI corridors and some of the most ecologically fragile places on earth. (WWF 2017) In the case of the BRI, areas within the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor are identified at 'greatest risk' facing active deforestation. For instance, regions within Heilongjiang in the Chinese territory, Republic of Buryatia, Irkutsk Oblast, Zabaykalsky Krai in the Russian territory and Lake Baikal close to Mongolian border are all identified as ecologically high-risk areas. (Elizabeth Losos et.al., 2019). Moreover, the proposed gas and oil pipeline project traversing Mongolia could disrupt the surrounding environment and threaten the livelihood of local communities in the areas. As Julian Dierkes, Professor at the University of British Columbia's Institute of Asian Research, observes, significant environmental risks would be born entirely by Mongolia. He adds that the pipeline would result in a major disruption of herders' activities unless there is community involvement in the planning. He also warns of the long-term risk of spills around a pipeline. (Communication to author, 2021) Indeed, the country's economic relations with its two neighbors is a major factor in its ability to protect the environment. This can be seen from the nature of economic dependence and resource extraction at the national level. This is especially true for mining and hydroelectric energy sectors.

As the mining sector is the engine of the Mongolian economy, addressing related environmental risks is a long-term challenge to sustainable development goals with local and global implications. For example, in 2015, Mongolia was planning to build a massive dam (with partial Chinese investment) on its largest river, *Orkhon*, both to meet increasing domestic power needs and provide water for the country's mining industry. This has led environmental groups to raise concerns of dangers of the hydroelectric power plant and a related pipeline project to Lake Baikal which is just over the border in Russia. (Anson Mackay 2015) Similarly, other proposed hydropower plant projects on the largest *Selenge* river and its tributaries in northern Mongolia involve danger to the water system of Lake Baikal. While alternative approaches such as supplying Mongolia with electricity from various Russian hydroelectric and thermal power plants were proposed, they have yet to be realized. (V.Yu.Malov 2019) On top of that, although the Government of Mongolia is committed to hydroelectric development as a potential solution to its electricity shortages and reduction of its energy dependency on its two neighbors, the hydroelectric energy sector has not been productive. This is largely because the rivers remain frozen for most of the year and rivers are relatively small in size and capacity. This has been further worsened by climate change impacts in recent years.

With regard to BRI projects, China has pledged to adhere to the laws and norms of the host-country. Technically, then, host countries are responsible to bear the risks associated. However, this is not just an issue of an individual country but also involves funding organizations and other related stakeholders. Therefore, for successful implementation of the CMREC projects under the BRI, a strategic environmental and social assessment is essential to ensure better outcomes. As a signatory of international agreements such as the Paris Agreement and Sustainable Development Goals Agenda of the United Nations, BRI projects are likely to challenge Mongolia to meet its international commitments and sustainable development efforts. According to a recent publication "Greening the China-Mongolia-Russia Economic Corridor: A Visual Synthesis" by Zoi Environment Network, while Mongolia generates 93 percent of its power from coal, it has the potential to become a

regional clean energy (wind and solar) exporter from the country's vast steppes and deserts. Under the CMREC, a possible project is to create a regional integrated power supply and transmission network for exporting clean energy out of the Gobi Desert to China, Japan, and other northeast Asian countries. Considering that China and Russia also have the highest energy potential from hydropower (*Statista, 2020*), there is an opportunity to switch to clean energy alternatives which could reduce greenhouse gas emissions in the region. However, so far, Chinese involvement in the Mongolia energy sector is still dependent on coal-related technologies as can be seen from the map below. (*Zoi Environment Network, 2020*) In this context, environmentally-friendly 'green' technologies will be key to greening the economic corridor.



Source: [Zoi Environmental Network 2020](#)

Finally, as some scholars state, while an 'economic corridor' is considered a geographically-targeted development initiative that helps to develop infrastructure and increase people-to-people and economic connectivity, it is also a geopolitical tool. (*Stephanie Petrella, 2018*) Against the backdrop of Beijing's increasing attention to its neighboring countries there is growing significance given to regional economic integration and connectivity. (*Peter Cai, 2017*) Therefore, the article further analyzes geopolitical factors within the context of Mongolia's 'Third Neighbor' policy. Geographically, Mongolia is sandwiched between Russia and China with no access to sea. Therefore, the Corridor under the BRI is a golden opportunity for landlocked Mongolia to reach a wider international market and to diversify its economy.

However, often-times, instead of seeing Mongolia as a potential contributor to global market chains, international specialists see it as a potential 'geopolitical chessboard' amid rising geopolitical tensions. This is because historically, Mongolia's relations were restricted within the sphere of its two neighbors. Mongolia was viewed as 'a pawn whose fate was determined by the nature of the Sino-Russian relationship.' (*Alicia Campi, 2020*) For example, Mongolia maintained good relations with both countries until the Sino-Soviet schism of the 1950s. With the intensified Sino-Soviet clash in the mid-1960s, the Mongolian People's Republic became a front-line of Soviet defense against China for the next two decades. (*Jeff Goodson, Jonathan Addleton 2020*) However, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Mongolia entered into a new era. Relations between China and Mongolia improved with the exchange of high-level state visits of each country. This was followed by the 'Declaration on Friendship and Good-Neighborly Cooperation' between Mongolia and Russia. (*Ts. Batbayar, 1998*)

In 1990, Mongolia took important steps toward becoming a multiparty, pluralistic and democratic society. With the New Constitution of 1992, Mongolia declared its intention of pursuing balanced relations with its two neighbors and a new framework for a continued open foreign policy and a new international orientation. While Mongolia enjoys friendly relations with its two neighbors, it also follows a 'Third Neighbor' foreign policy. Given changing geopolitical realities of the 21st century, Mongolia's relations with other countries including the United States, Japan, Germany and South Korea are expanding. Particularly, the vast mineral resources in Mongolia have not only attracted foreign investments but also have allowed it to expand its relations with those countries. Among its 'third neighbors', the role of the United States is an important factor in its relations with its two neighbors. Arguably, growing geopolitical and geoeconomic competition between China and the United

States will affect Mongolia significantly as it is considered important in China's Belt and Road Initiative and in the U.S 'Free and Open Indo-Pacific.' (*Mendee Jargalsaikhan, 2020*) For example, experts highlight the direct impact of the so-called U.S-China trade war on Mongolia. As China is Mongolia's dominant economic partner, this leaves it highly vulnerable to Chinese economic fluctuations and Chinese pressures. (*Jeff Goodson, Jonathan Addleton 2020*) Given that, it can be said that Mongolia's fate will be substantially affected by geopolitical rivalries among the big powers. This includes the competition for access to Mongolia's mineral and energy sources. For Ulaanbaatar, this would mean that it has to ensure that the development of its mining industry does not result in dependency on either of its neighbors. As a result, external investments from third countries are significant. On one hand, as a young democratic country, Mongolia looks up to its 'third neighbors' like the United States, Japan, and others; on the other hand, its economic fate is closely connected with Russia and China. The important question for Mongolia is not who might win in the great power competition, but how Mongolia can navigate through all these factors while keeping the right balance in the sphere of geopolitics in flux.

This is not to suggest that these geopolitical factors will be a major challenge for the implementation of BRI projects. In fact, as some Mongolian scholars point out, rather than seeing geopolitical factors as a hindrance to Mongolia's infrastructure development, it is important to see it as an economic and political opportunity. (*Uradyn E.Bulag, 2014*) This can also be supported by international experts who argue that while the majority of analysts see Chinese motives under the BRI as combining economic and strategic drivers, focusing on the geopolitical dimensions of the BRI undermines its principally geo-economic drivers. (*Peter Cai, 2017*) In this context, it can be said that Mongolia can benefit from the BRI provided all the parties can exert strong political will and commitment to the projects under the Corridor. As far as China and Russia is concerned, the rapprochement of the two countries following the Ukraine crisis, is likely to persist for the time being as both Russia and China face sanctions from the West, above all from the United States. This could push the two countries to strengthen their economic cooperation within the framework of the BRI. While Western analysts are sceptical about the continuation of the Sino-Russian alliance, some experts highlight that even in the case of lifted or relaxed sanctions of western countries, Russia is likely to tilt toward China for its economic growth. (*Alexander Gabuev, 2016*) While it is too early to judge whether the envisaged Corridor between China, Mongolia and Russia would be successful or not in the long term, it can become clear that potential outcomes from the BRI projects have far-reaching regional and global implications.

Overall, BRI projects hold both opportunities and challenges for Mongolia. However, if addressed correctly, it seems that the challenges can be translated into future opportunities. In other words, to fully benefit from the Corridor and to avoid potential risks involved, care should be taken to safeguard the environmental and social criteria in the implementation processes of the projects. This would in turn, contribute to realization of Sustainable Development Goals both at the national and global levels.

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Yelif Ulagpan is a Master candidate at Shanghai University in Shanghai and is an affiliate of [Center for the History of Global Development, Shanghai University](#). Her research interests are in the fields of international and public affairs, (sustainable) development, public health

and the environment. Contact: yelif.ulyqpan@gmail.com

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